

## **The learning of Foreign Languages in Kenyan Universities: The Relevance of French**

*Michael Nginye*

### **Introduction**

Everybody seems to agree that the world today has been transformed into a small village. The effects of globalization have been felt all over the world and the best reaction that people seem to prefer is accepting this reality and learning to live with it. One of the obvious consequences of this phenomenon is that people from different countries and cultures are now interacting more than ever before. This interaction will almost always involve communication. And communication implies language. It is in this regard that more and more people are now learning one or more languages, other than their own, that is to say foreign languages. This need to learn foreign languages has existed in Kenya for a long time. However, languages that have not been classified under the “traditional foreign languages” category are now being learnt at post-secondary school level.

This article attempts to find out the exact status of the learning of foreign languages in Kenyan universities. Specific reference is made to French as the first choice foreign language in Kenyan universities given that the main objective of this study is to determine the place of this language in relation to the other foreign languages. It therefore means that an attempt will be made to identify the implications of this new trend in foreign language learning that may or may not amount to a threat in as far as French is concerned.

It is interesting to note that research that has been conducted in the domain of competition among languages has largely concentrated on the two “giants”: English and French. For this reason therefore, a study whose focus is on competition between French and languages which do not include English is quite a novelty. The competition between English and French is often more evident in regions where neither of these languages exist with a certain status. In Anglophone countries for example, French will mostly be present as one of the more popular foreign languages. Francophone countries on their part will have English as a formidable force in regard to foreign language learning. However, the more open competition between these two languages is witnessed in a country that is neither Anglophone nor Francophone. English seems to have the upper hand especially if one has to consider the total number of speakers worldwide but French is still a force to reckon with as we will illustrate in this paper.

### **Foreign Languages in Kenya**

The classification of foreign languages in Kenya cannot be an easy task if the definition of a foreign language is taken as it exists in the dictionaries. According to the Le Robert International dictionary, "foreign" means "that which is from another country." A foreign language in Kenya is therefore any language that is not Kenyan. English is a foreign language in Japan; and an English speaker living in Japan can say that Japanese is a foreign language to him or her.

According to Cuq and Gruca (2003:93), the concept of foreign language is understood in relationship to that of mother tongue. These authors posit that, as a point of departure, any language that is not the mother tongue of a given speaker, is foreign. Barthélémy (2007:76) describes French as a foreign language as that form of learning/teaching of French by individuals who are not Francophone or French speakers. These definitions will obviously attract debate among linguists since they do not seem to take into consideration the various linguistic settings in different countries. One can for example argue that English is a foreign language in Kenya because "it is from another country" yet this language enjoys a status enjoyed by no other language, including the indigenous ones; i.e. the official language. As a result, more Kenyans speak English than any other language present in this country. More arguments can arise from the definitions above when the concept of foreign language is apprehended from the individual speaker's point of view: that a foreign language is any language that is not the mother tongue. For many Kenyans, this would mean that even Kiswahili (officially, the national language) is a foreign language. To avoid this form of confusion, foreign language will be taken to be any language that is not Kenyan for the purposes of this paper.

It will also be important to base ourselves on the more widely accepted definition in the area of foreign language teaching/learning that posits that a foreign language is that which is acquired by those to whom it is not their mother-tongue in a formal education set-up through a process that is more or less voluntary (CUq and Graca, 2003:94)

This will therefore mean that French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Arabic, Japanese, Chinese, etc are foreign languages in Kenya and any interested persons can learn one or more of these languages in formal school/college/university settings that exist in Kenya. There are seven public universities in Kenya: Nairobi, Moi, Kenyatta, Egerton, Jomo Kenyatta, Maseno and Masinde Muliro. To add on to this list, there are 17 private universities in the country which have either full or interim charter. These include:

- Africa Nazarene University.
- Aga Khan University.
- Catholic University of Eastern Africa.
- East Africa School of Theology.
- Kabarak University
- Kenya Highlands Bible College.

- Kenya Methodist University
- Kiriri Women's University of Science and Technology.
- Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology.
- Nairobi International School of Theology
- Pan Africa Christian College
- Scott Theological College
- St. Paul's United Theological College
- Strathmore University
- Greta University
- United States International University (USIU)
- University of Eastern Africa, Baraton.

Most of these universities are backed by religious organizations.

Information available at the French Embassy in Kenya (Bureau de Cooperation pour le francais) indicates that French is taught in the following universities: Nairobi, Kenyatta, Maseno, Moi, USIU, Strathmore, Egerton, the University of Eastern Africa-Baraton and Catholic University of Eastern Africa. German language is taught at the University of Nairobi and at Kenyatta University. The United States International University offers Spanish, Japanese and Chinese in addition to French. Kenyatta University also offers Japanese as a foreign language. Recently, a Chinese Language Center was created at the University of Nairobi.

It is therefore evident that the French language is at the top of the pack and it is therefore necessary to find out why this language remains relevant to Kenyans.

### **The Relevance of French**

French language has been taught in Kenyan Universities for a long time. The University of Nairobi which is the oldest in Kenya, created the Sub-department of French in the late sixties making it older than the other Kenyan Universities which were all founded long after the University of Nairobi. This indicates that the relevance of the French language in Kenya was recognized a long time ago and it would therefore be interesting to find out if this relevance still exists.

The bulk of students who are pursuing French in Kenyan Universities started learning the language in secondary schools since French is not an examinable subject in primary school level. Statistics indicate that more secondary schools (339 schools in 2006 according to the French Embassy) offer French as a school subject than any other language. However, more learners join the beginner's classes at the Universities which offer French at this level although the demand for these classes is not commensurate with available teachers. Indeed Seminega (2006:29) observes that all public universities in Kenya have insufficient numbers of lecturers of French. The same can be said about the few private Universities which offer French and mostly rely on part-time lecturers to ensure the smooth running of their programmes.

In a recent newspaper question and answer article, the French Ambassador to Kenya, Elisabeth Barbier (Daily Nation, July 14, 2007, p. 16) said that the Alliance Francais in Nairobi is among the largest in Africa with 4,000 students a year. The ambassador further emphasized that French is spoken by over 200 million people and that the number is increasing every year. In its report, the High Commission of the International Francophone Organization (2004-2005:57) provides the following data in regard to the learning of French language in non-Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa (countries which are not members of the International Francophone Organisation):

Country	Number of Students			Total (Our Own)
	Primary Sch.	Secondary Sch.	Higher Ed.	
South Africa	1,700 (approx.)	15,000 (approx.)	2,700 (approx.)	19,400
Angola	2,000 (approx)	45,000 (approx.)	2,407 (approx.)	49,407
Botswana	2,500	3,125	189	5,814
Eritrea	20	130	150	300
Ethiopia	3,500	2,000	300	5,800
Kenya	12,000	33,000	2,500	47,500
Malawi	8,000	13,200	90	21,290
Mozambique	650	24,900	500	26,050
Namibia	150	1773	60	1,983
Swaziland	2,500 (approx.)	4,000 (approx.)	15	6,515
Tanzania	1,000	19,000	100	20,100
Zambia	-	20,000	136	20,136
Zimbabwe	-	3,600	280	3,880

From the figures above, Kenya is only second to Angola (47,500 students compared to 49,407 students). This clearly shows that the demand for French in Kenya is very high. As Kazadi (2006:21) puts it, nobody does something without having an interest in it. The sheer numbers witnessed in French classrooms in Kenya point to the fact that learners attach a lot of importance to French as a foreign language. While still referring to this importance of the French language, it would be necessary to look at the status of this language at the international level.

A study conducted at Virginia Tech in the United States and whose results are available on the Internet describes French as “the only language other than English (that is) spoken on five continents. French and English are the only two global languages.” The results further indicate that “while any language will be useful for some jobs or for some regions, French is the only foreign language that can be useful throughout the world as well as in the United States.” Other details provided by this report include the generally known facts that French along with English is the official working language of:

- The United Nations.
- UNESCO.
- NATO.
- Organization for Economic and Development (OECS).
- The International Labour Bureau.
- The International Olympic Committee.
- The 31-member Council of Europe.
- The European Union.
- The Universal Postal Union.
- The International Red Cross.

French is also the dominant working language at the European Court of Justice, the European Court of Auditors in Luxembourg and the Press Room at European Commission in Brussels, Belgium. To illustrate the importance of French, the Virginia Tech report quotes a recent listing of international jobs (July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2007) distributed by the US State Department:

*125 required or preferred French, 31 Spanish; 25 a UN language (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish); 10 Portuguese; 7 Arabic; 4 Russian and 2 German.*

Further reference is made as a reminder that France plays at the top of the league in virtually all sectors: economy, science, technology, tourism, military, agriculture e.t.c.

In the Eastern Africa region, French may acquire a new status following the recent expansion of the East African Community (EAC) to include Rwanda and Burundi. French is spoken as an official language in these two countries and after joining the EAC, it will now mean that any documents or conferences involving the five member states (others being Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania) must take the presence of French

into account. Further a field, Heads of States and Governments in Africa have been debating the possibility of creating a United States of Africa and this has elicited heated debates across the continent. Whether this comes to pass in the near future or later, it will involve an elaborate language policy make-up where languages such as French, English, Kiswahili, Arabic, Hausa e.t.c. will definitely feature prominently.

In the tourism sector, Kenya has recorded significant growth in recent years. According to the latest Economic Survey, international arrivals rose by 8.2 per cent from 1.5 million in 2005 to 1.6 million in 2006 (Daily Nation, May 29, 2007, p. 7). Tourism is one of the main sectors where knowledge of a foreign language is imperative. Indeed, the Kenya Utalii College in Nairobi (which was recently described by the Kenya Tourism Board Managing Director, Dr. Ongong'a Achieng as the "barometer of standards in tourism training in the country" -Daily Nation, July 21, 2007, p 16) offers a wide variety of foreign languages to its students. Growth in tourism translates to more employment opportunities for Kenyans who can speak French.

Several Francophone multi-nationals operate in Kenya. These include companies with interests in sectors such as oil, manufacturing, construction, banking e.t.c. These will obviously need personnel able to communicate in the French language. Again, local businesses with the capacity to spread their wings into the entire eastern and central Africa region have the need to hire Francophone Kenyans for their operations.

A mobile phone operator in Kenya has created a network that will enable their customers across six Anglophone and Francophone Central and Eastern African countries to make and receive calls while using local airtime cards. These countries include the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Such a network will serve the purpose of creating more avenues for interaction between French and English speakers.

Every Kenyan who has lived mostly in urban settings has come into contact with the French language whether this is in the form of an item on a restaurant menu or actually physically meeting a French speaker. Congolese music is quite popular in Kenya and the musicians have a tendency of mixing their languages with French in their songs. This contact cannot be said to exist in regard to other languages such as Russian, German or Spanish. Indeed, a new trend popular with local television stations of screening Mexican soap opera (translated into English) has more to do with the theme (almost invariably, love and betrayal) and quality than with the language. In actual fact, most fans of such programmes have difficulty pronouncing the titles of their favourite soap operas and very few of them would be able to recognize the language used.

### **The Future of French**

Despite the glaring evidence that French still remains relevant to Kenya and to Kenyans, several challenges need to be addressed so as to create a better environment for this language to progress in the country. Seminega (2006:27) identifies problems faced by lecturers, learners and institutions of learning in regard to French. Some of

these problems include inadequate number of lecturers, lack of appropriate learning materials, appropriate content for the courses, lack of scholarships for both lecturers and learners, etc.

However, it should be noted that the present situation is not discouraging. More efforts need to be made in improving the teaching and learning of French in Kenya now that it is evident that this language is here to stay. The French Embassy needs to work harder with the Government bodies in this area to ensure that all interested persons have the chance to learn the language.

### **Conclusion**

The facts presented in this article would make it difficult for somebody to talk of a threat, unless imaginary, to the French language in Kenya. Although the French government has done a lot in helping to improve the status of the language in the country, the credit surely goes to Kenyans themselves for their enthusiasm in learning this language. It is for this reason, for example, that Kenya boasts of having the highest numbers of French learners in the region.

Consistent efforts need to be made in dealing with the challenges, the problems and the opportunities that come with the knowledge of French. It would, for example, be important to ensure that more interested learners get to enroll for French classes and in the same vein, information regarding job opportunities to those who graduate be kept flowing.

Academic programmes already existing in the various local universities should be streamlined to meet the changing needs of the learners. It would be prudent, for example, to encourage the learners to learn the language so that they can use it in their everyday career activities rather than learning it for the sake of it.

The observation made here that French does not face any serious threat from any other foreign language should not be mistrusted to mean that those involved in ensuring its growth and development can relax and pat each other on the back. The fact of the matter is that the current position is as a result of work that has been done so far and it would therefore be very prudent to keep on working harder. However, it is in the interest of Kenya and Kenyans to encourage the learning of more foreign languages since, as we pointed out from the start, the world today is smaller and people meet more often with their brothers and sisters from every corner of the planet.

In sum, it is not far-fetched to state that French remains the foreign language of the future for Kenya.

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